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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 07 ADDIS ABABA 002584

NSC FOR RICE  
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SUBJECT: ALLAH IN ETHIOPIA: MOSTLY QUIET ON THE ISLAMIC FRONT

REFS: A) 94 ADDIS ABABA 009151, B) 96 ADDIS ABABA 005554,  
C) 96 ADDIS ABABA 008833, D) ADDIS ABABA 001871,  
E) 95 ADDIS ABABA 005809

11. (U) CLASSIFIED BY POLOFF JEFFREY JACOBS, REASON 1.5  
(D) .

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SUMMARY  
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12. (C) FEW ISSUES ARE OF GREATER LONG-TERM CONCERN TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA (GFDRE) THAN THE THREAT OF MILITANT POLITICAL ISLAM. AT PRESENT THE GFDRE FACES LITTLE INTERNAL THREAT FROM ISLAMIC EXTREMIST GROUPS, BUT SPORADIC VIOLENCE BETWEEN GOVERNMENT FORCES AND ISLAMIC MILITANTS HAS TAKEN PLACE ALONG THE BORDER WITH SOMALIA, AND ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS ARE BELIEVED RESPONSIBLE FOR A SERIES OF RECENT HOTEL BOMBINGS AND AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON AN ETHNIC SOMALI MINISTER. ALTHOUGH THE 1994 CONSTITUTION GUARANTEES FREEDOM OF RELIGION, AND THIS IS RESPECTED IN PRACTICE, PAST REGIMES SUBSIDIZED THE CHRISTIAN ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH WHILE MUSLIM INSTITUTIONS ATROPHIED. THE GFDRE IS WORKING DILIGENTLY TO IMPROVE RELATIONS WITH MUSLIMS AND TO ASSIST THE SUPREME ISLAMIC COUNCIL (SIC), THE ONLY GRASSROOTS ISLAMIC ORGANIZATION WITH NATIONAL SCOPE. MUSLIMS ARE PLEASED WITH THE RELIGIOUS POLICIES OF THE GFDRE, BUT ETHIOPIA'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY IS IN DISARRAY AND STRUGGLING TO REORGANIZE. HAVING SAID THIS, THE NUMBER OF ADHERENTS TO ISLAM IS GROWING FAST AND MUSLIMS MAY SOON OUTNUMBER THE SLOW GROWING AND CONSERVATIVE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH. THIS CABLE FULFILLS A REQUIREMENT OF THE POST REPORTING PLAN. END SUMMARY.

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REVAMPED ISLAMIC COUNCIL OCCUPIES NEW OFFICES  
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13. (C) POLOFF AND POL/ECON FSN MET WITH SENIOR OFFICERS OF THE SUPREME ISLAMIC COUNCIL (SIC) IN THEIR NEW OFFICE ON 20 MARCH. THE SIC MOVED IN LATE 1996 FROM CRAMPED OFFICES NEAR THE GRAND MOSQUE IN THE DENSELY POPULATED MARKET DISTRICT TO MORE SPACIOUS ACCOMMODATIONS SEVERAL KILOMETERS AWAY. THE COUNCIL WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1974 BY THE FORMER DERG REGIME, FOLLOWING LARGE ISLAMIC

DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE HAILE SELASSIE GOVERNMENT. MUSLIM LEADERS SEE THEIR ROLE AS AN INTERFACE BETWEEN THE GFDRE AND ETHIOPIA'S LARGE MUSLIM COMMUNITY. MUSLIMS CONSTITUTE MORE THAN 40 PERCENT OF ETHIOPIA'S POPULATION OF AT LEAST 56 MILLION.

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FORMER SIC LEADERSHIP DISMISSED FOR CORRUPTION  
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14. (C) ALTHOUGH THE COUNCIL IS THE ONLY GRASSROOTS ISLAMIC ORGANIZATION WITH NATIONAL SCOPE, COUNCIL LEADERS ARE STRUGGLING TO REORGANIZE AFTER YEARS OF NEGLECT AND CORRUPTION. THE SIC WAS RESTRUCTURED IN 1992 AND WAS REVAMPED AGAIN IN OCTOBER, 1996, FOLLOWING THE ARREST AND IMPRISONMENT OF NEARLY ALL TOP SIC OFFICIALS FOR CORRUPTION. OF THE SIC LEADERS KNOWN TO THE EMBASSY IN 1994 (REF A), ONLY GENERAL SECRETARY ABDURAZAK MOHAMMED REMAINS WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION.

15. (C) THE NEW COUNCIL IS MORE STREAMLINED AND PROVIDES FOR EQUAL REPRESENTATION FOR ALL OF ETHIOPIA'S FEDERAL STATES. THE COUNCIL CONSISTS OF 121 MEMBERS. EACH STATE HAS 11 MEMBERS WHILE THE MORE POPULOUS OROMIYA REGIONAL STATE HAS 12. THE GROUP'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE HAS THIRTEEN MEMBERS. THE FORMER CHAIRMAN, HAJI MOHAMMED AHMED AMAN, DIED IN LATE 1996 AND WILL NOT BE REPLACED UNTIL THE PLANNED JUNE 1997 SIC CONFERENCE. THE COUNCIL HAS ALSO ELIMINATED THE POSITION OF SECOND VICE-CHAIRMAN AND DEPUTY GENERAL SECRETARY.

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MOST AFFILIATED ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS IN LIMBO  
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16. (C) PREVIOUSLY THE SUPREME ISLAMIC COUNCIL WAS AN UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION WITH SEVERAL AFFILIATED ISLAMIC GROUPS (REF A), BUT COUNCIL MEMBERS ACCUSED THE FORMER LEADERSHIP OF USING THE VARIOUS GROUPS TO MISAPPROPRIATE FUNDS AND THE AFFILIATED GROUPS HAVE FALLEN INTO DISARRAY. THE ETHIOPIAN KORANIC ORGANIZATION STILL EXISTS ON PAPER, BUT IS INACTIVE. THE ETHIOPIAN ULEMA (MUSLIM CLERICS) ARE EDUCATED INDIVIDUALS WITH FORMAL RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION. THE ULEMA DEAL WITH ALL RELIGIOUS ISSUES AT THE LOWEST POSSIBLE LEVEL. THE COUNCIL IS IN THE PROCESS OF RESTRUCTURING THE ULEMA SYSTEM WITH THE GOAL OF PUTTING QUALIFIED INDIVIDUALS IN POSITIONS NATIONWIDE TO TEACH THE TRUE FAITH TO BELIEVERS. THE SIC HOPES TO HOLD ELECTIONS TO SELECT ULEMAS PRIOR TO THE GROUP'S JUNE CONFERENCE.

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DISPUTES AMONG MUSLIM FACTIONS SAID TO BE RESOLVED  
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17. (C) MUSLIM LEADERS INSISTED THAT TENSIONS BETWEEN ETHIOPIA'S SHAFI AND WAHABBI MUSLIMS HAVE SUBSIDED. THE EMBASSY REPORTED IN 1994 THAT THE TWO GROUPS CLASHED VIOLENTLY ON MUSLIM HOLIDAYS IN THREE CITIES NATIONWIDE. COUNCIL LEADERS REPLIED THAT ALL ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS ARE SUNNIS AND THAT INTERNAL DIFFERENCES ARE MINOR. SIC LEADERS EXPRESSED SURPRISE THAT THE EMBASSY HAD EVEN HEARD OF THE EARLIER DISPUTE.

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SOME OVERLAP BETWEEN THE SIC AND SHARIA COURTS  
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18. (C) THE COUNCIL AND THE SHARIA COURTS ARE TWO SEPARATE INSTITUTIONS, ALTHOUGH THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES OCCASIONALLY OVERLAP. THE SHARIA COURTS WERE ORIGINALLY ESTABLISHED UNDER HAILE SELASSIE AND WERE EMPOWERED TO OVERSEE ISLAMIC ISSUES CONCERNING MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, WILLS AND TESTAMENTS, AND THE CARE AND GUARDIANSHIP OF MINOR CHILDREN. THE 1994 CONSTITUTION REAFFIRMS THESE RIGHTS. BECAUSE THE COUNCIL IS RESPONSIBLE FOR RELIGIOUS ISSUES, THE LEADERS TOLD POLOFF THEIR ROLE IS TO ENSURE THAT ONLY QUALIFIED MEMBERS SERVE ON THE COURTS.

¶9. (C) ISLAMIC LEADERS HOPE TO REBUILD THE SHARIA COURT SYSTEM. THEY ALLEGE THAT UNDER THE PREVIOUS COUNCIL LEADERSHIP SHARIA COURT JUDGES, WHO HOLD OFFICE FOR LIFE, WERE SELECTED BASED ON NEPOTISM AND BRIBERY, RATHER THAN FOR THEIR RELIGIOUS EXPERTISE. AS A RESULT, THE NUMBER OF SHARIA COURTS DWINDLED AND THEIR ROLE IN ETHIOPIAN MUSLIM SOCIETY DIMINISHED ACCORDINGLY. COUNCIL LEADERS HOPE TO CREATE A FUNCTIONING SHARIA COURT IN EVERY DISTRICT IN ETHIOPIA (COMMENT. THERE ARE MORE THAN SIX HUNDRED DISTRICTS NATIONWIDE. END COMMENT.)

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GFDRE IS FUNDING SHARIA COURTS  
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¶10. (C) USING THE AMHARA REGIONAL STATE AS AN EXAMPLE, THE MUSLIM LEADERS SAID THEY HAVE PETITIONED THE REGIONAL GOVERNMENT THERE FOR MONEY TO HIRE 118 SHARIA COURT JUDGES. SELECTION IS BASED ON A RIGOROUS WRITTEN NATIONAL EXAMINATION. FIFTY HAVE ASSUMED OFFICE AND THE COUNCIL EXPECTS THE REMAINDER TO BE HIRED AFTER THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW FISCAL YEAR IN JULY. ASKED WHY A SECULAR GOVERNMENT IS PAYING FOR RELIGIOUS JUDGES, THE LEADERS REPLIED THAT UNDER THE CONSTITUTION SHARIA COURTS PROVIDE A JUDICIAL SERVICE AND ARE DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE TO THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE. (COMMENT: SHARIA COURTS HAVE JURISDICTION ONLY IN SPECIFIED FAMILY DISPUTES BETWEEN MUSLIMS, AND CAN ONLY BE EMPLOYED WITH THE CONSENT OF BOTH PARTIES. END COMMENT.)

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MUSLIM LEADERS BELIEVE PROPERTY WILL BE RETURNED  
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¶11. (C) THE SUPREME ISLAMIC COUNCIL IS WORKING CLOSELY WITH ETHIOPIAN FEDERAL AUTHORITIES TO RECOVER PROPERTY SEIZED BY THE GOVERNMENT IN DECADES PAST. ALTHOUGH OFFICIALS OF THE DERG REGIME PERMITTED THE SIC TO FILE TO RECOVER LAND AND PROPERTY TAKEN AROUND ADDIS ABABA'S GRAND MOSQUE, THE APPLICATIONS SAT FOR TEN YEARS WITHOUT RESULT. THE KEY PROBLEM, ACCORDING TO COUNCIL LEADERS, WAS A TOTAL LACK OF RECORDS. OVER THE PAST YEAR, HOWEVER, THE GROUP HAS WORKED WITH THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE AND THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT AGENCY, TO INTERVIEW LOCAL RESIDENTS TO ESTABLISH PROPERTY RIGHTS. A JOINT COMMITTEE REPORT IS IMMINENT AND THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY EXPECTS TO RECOVER SOME OF ITS FORMER PROPERTY SOON.

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ONLY LIMITED CONTACT WITH INTERNATIONAL MUSLIM COMMUNITY  
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¶12. (C) POLOFF ASKED ABOUT THE SUPREME COUNCIL'S CONTACTS WITH VARIOUS INTERNATIONAL MUSLIM GROUPS. THE MUSLIM LEADERS SAID THEY HAVE HAD LIMITED CONTACT WITH THE MUSLIM WORLD LEAGUE. THE ISLAMIC DEVELOPMENT BANK RECENTLY OFFERED TO PROVIDE SCHOLARSHIPS TO STUDENTS OF ENGINEERING, MEDICINE, AND AGRICULTURE. NEVERTHELESS, THE MUSLIM LEADERS INSISTED THAT THEIR FIRST PRIORITY HAS BEEN TO CREATE INTERNAL LINKS TO ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS. EXPANDING CONTACTS WITH THE INTERNATIONAL MUSLIM COMMUNITY IS A SECONDARY GOAL.

¶13. (C) SOME MONEY IS ARRIVING FROM ABROAD. THE NUMBER OF MOSQUES IN ETHIOPIA DOUBLED OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, FUNDED IN LARGE PART BY PRIVATE MONEY FROM SAUDI ARABIA (REF E). PRIVATE SAUDI BUSINESSMAN MOHAMMED AL-AMOUDI HAS BUILT SEVERAL MOSQUES AND KORANIC SCHOOLS, INCLUDING A NEW COMPLEX IN THE AFAR REGIONAL STATE. WHEN AMBASSADOR ASKED LOCAL RESIDENTS IN HOSAINA, A ZONAL CAPITAL IN THE SOUTHERN PEOPLE'S REGION, WHO WAS FINANCING CONSTRUCTION OF A HUGE, NEW MOSQUE, THE LOCALS PROFESSED NOT TO KNOW. THE EMBASSY HAS NO REPORTS OF LIBYAN INVOLVEMENT IN ETHIOPIAN MUSLIM AFFAIRS.

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MUSLIM RELATIONS WITH CHRISTIANS ARE GENERALLY HARMONIOUS  
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¶14. (C) ETHIOPIA'S MUSLIM COMMUNITY HAS HISTORICALLY FELT MARGINALIZED AND DISCRIMINATED AGAINST BY RULING CHRISTIAN GOVERNMENTS. PREVIOUS ETHIOPIAN REGIMES SUBSIDIZED THE CHRISTIAN ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH, WHICH CLAIMS MEMBERSHIP OF ROUGHLY HALF OF ETHIOPIA'S POPULATION. ALTHOUGH TENSIONS OCCASIONALLY FLARE UP BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS, THE COUNCIL ASSURED EMBASSY OFFICERS THAT THE TWO COMMUNITIES LIVE IN PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE. THE PATRIARCH OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH HAS AGREED WITH THAT ASSESSMENT, WITH THE SOLE EXCEPTION OF ADDIS ABABA, WHERE THE CRUSH OF URBAN LIFE SOMETIMES BRINGS THE TWO GROUPS INTO CONFLICT (REF C). CHRISTIAN ELDERS IN THE AMHARA REGIONAL STATE ECHOED THE COMMENTS OF THE COUNCIL LEADERS. THEY TOLD THE AMBASSADOR IN FEBRUARY THAT MEMBERS OF BOTH RELIGIONS HAVE LIVED PEACEFULLY FOR CENTURIES AND HAVE EVOLVED MECHANISMS TO RESOLVE DISPUTES. INTERMARRIAGE IS NOT UNCOMMON AND IT IS NOT UNUSUAL TO FIND FAMILIES WITH PRACTICING CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS UNDER THE SAME ROOF. NEVERTHELESS, ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ELDERS REPORTED MINOR QUARRELS, BUT NO SERIOUS VIOLENCE, OVER THE AGGRESSIVE EVANGELICAL TACTICS OF TWO NEW ARRIVALS: JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND PENTACOSTALS (REF D). DURING THE AMBASSADOR'S EXTENSIVE TRAVELS IN THE PAST NINE MONTHS, HE USUALLY ASKS CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS ALIKE ABOUT RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS. THE VERDICT IS UNANIMOUS; THEY GET ALONG TOGETHER FINE AND THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT IS TOLERANT OF BOTH GROUPS.

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SIC: NO PLACE FOR AL-ITTIHAD IN ETHIOPIA

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¶15. (C) COUNCIL MEMBERS DENOUNCED THE MILITANT FUNDAMENTALIST GROUP, AL-ITTIHAD, AND PREDICTED THE GROUP WOULD WIN FEW SUPPORTERS AMONG ETHIOPIA'S MUSLIM POPULATION. THE LEADERS REMINDED US THAT THEY WENT ON TELEVISION IN JANUARY AND CONDEMNED ALL TERRORIST ACTS. COUNCIL LEADERS CONTENDED THAT SINCE THE MAJORITY OF ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS BELIEVE THAT THEIR RELIGIOUS RIGHTS ARE PROTECTED UNDER THE NEW CONSTITUTION, THE EXTREMIST MESSAGE HAS LITTLE APPEAL. THE LEADERS ALSO ACCUSED AL-ITTIHAD OF MISINTERPRETING THE KORAN AND PREYING ON IGNORANT MUSLIMS WHO DO NOT UNDERSTAND THEIR RELIGION. THE GROWING PRESENCE OF TRAINED ULEMAS WILL UNDERMINE AL-ITTIHAD'S EXTREMIST MESSAGE, THEY BELIEVE.

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PM MELES SAYS AL-ITTIHAD A TROJAN HORSE FOR TERRORISTS

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¶16. (C) PRIME MINISTER MELES ZENAWI HAS A LESS SANGUINE VIEW OF THE MILITANT FUNDAMENTALISTS. HE HAS FREQUENTLY STATED THAT A STATELESS SOMALIA POSES THE GREATEST LONG-TERM SECURITY THREAT TO ETHIOPIA AND TO THE STABILITY OF THE REGION. MELES FEARS THAT SOMALIA MAY BECOME A BASE AND SAFE HAVEN FOR INTERNATIONAL TERRORISTS, CRIMINALS, AND DRUG TRAFFICKERS, ESPECIALLY AS THE WELCOME MAT FOR SUCH GROUPS IS WITHDRAWN FROM MORE TRADITIONAL LOCATIONS. THE PRIME MINISTER HAS WARNED THAT AL-ITTIHAD HAS BECOME "A TROJAN HORSE FOR ALL TYPES OF TERRORIST GROUPS" AND THAT "SOME GOVERNMENTS ARE UNDERESTIMATING AL-ITTIHAD BECAUSE THEY VIEW IT AS A PURELY SOMALI ENDEAVOR."

¶17. (C) THE PRIME MINISTER BELIEVES THAT AL-ITTIHAD DRAWS SUPPORT FROM LOCAL COMMUNITIES BECAUSE IT IS THE ONLY ORGANIZED GROUP IN A POSITION TO PROVIDE NEEDED GOODS AND SERVICES IN REMOTE DESTITUTE AREAS. THE EXTREMISTS RECEIVE FINANCIAL AND OTHER SUPPORT FROM IRAN, IRAQ, SUDAN, LIBYA, AND PRIVATE DONORS IN SEVERAL GULF STATES. TO COUNTER THE EXTREMISTS, MELES WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE CREATION OF A FIREWALL ALONG THE ETHIO-SOMALI BORDER THROUGH THE PROVISION OF CROSS-BORDER HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC GROUPS INSIDE SOMALIA. THE ETHIOPIAN MILITARY CONDUCTS AGGRESSIVE PATROLLING TO COUNTER AL-ITTIHAD'S LIMITED MILITARY ACTIVITIES

THROUGHOUT THE SOMALI REGIONAL STATE.

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GFDRE FOCUSED ON STABILITY IN SOMALIA AND SOMALI REGION  
OF ETHIOPIA  
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¶18. (C) VIRTUALLY ALL SOMALIS ARE MUSLIM. THE GFDRE HAS DEVOTED SIGNIFICANT SCARCE RESOURCES TO ADDRESS SOMALI ISSUES. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT MOVED QUICKLY TO MOBILIZE DONORS TO ASSESS THE SOMALI REGION'S HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN RESPONSE TO REPORTS OF DROUGHT AND FAMINE THERE. IN RESPONSE TO THE ONGOING INSTABILITY IN SOMALIA, ETHIOPIA HOSTED THE SODERE PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE THAT ATTRACTED 26 SOMALI POLITICAL FACTIONS, AND THE GFDRE HAS EMBARKED ON A MAJOR DIPLOMATIC EFFORT TO OBTAIN DONOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO SUSTAIN THE SODERE PROCESS. SINCE EARLY 1995 THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT HAS SUPPORTED PEACE AND RECONCILIATION TALKS BETWEEN FEUDING ETHIO-SOMALI CLANS. TO REINFORCE ITS NEUTRALITY, THE EPRDF HAS PUT OFF AN APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP BY THE ETHIOPIAN SOMALI DEMOCRATIC LEAGUE WHICH NOW RUNS THE REGIONAL GOVERNMENT.

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OTHER MILITANT ISLAMIC GROUPS INACTIVE  
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¶19. (C) OTHER DOMESTIC RADICAL ISLAMIC GROUPS HAVE SLIPPED INTO OBSCURITY. THE ISLAMIC FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF OROMIYA, IN THE EARLY 1990'S THE MOST ACTIVE ETHIOPIAN ISLAMIC RADICAL GROUP, HAS FADED FROM THE SCENE. THE MILITANT WING OF THE OGADEN NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT HAS CONFINED ITS ACTIVITIES TO PERIODICALLY APPEALING FOR FUNDS FROM SAFE POSITIONS IN EXILE AND FORWARDING PROTEST LETTERS TO WESTERN EMBASSIES IN THE REGION.

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MUSLIM "MAN-ON-THE-STREET" GENERALLY SATISFIED  
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¶20. (C) DESPITE OCCASIONAL CRITICISM OF SELECT INDIVIDUALS IN GOVERNMENT, THE EMBASSY'S MUSLIM CONTACTS ALMOST UNANIMOUSLY INSIST THAT THEY HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THE GFDRE AND REPORT THAT LINES OF COMMUNICATION ARE OPEN. EVEN IN THE UNDERDEVELOPED SOMALI STATE, WHERE CITIZENS ARE FRUSTRATED WITH AN INEFFECTIVE AND PROBABLY CORRUPT REGIONAL ADMINISTRATION, MOST CITIZENS BLAME THE REGIONAL PRESIDENT - NOT FEDERAL AUTHORITIES - FOR THE LACK OF DEVELOPMENT. MOST EXPECT FEDERAL AUTHORITIES TO INTERVENE TO ASSIST THE REGION AND MANY PRAISE THE GFDRE FOR SENDING TRAINING TEAMS TO THE REGION AND FOR INVITING THE REGION'S ADMINISTRATORS TO VISIT OTHER REGIONAL STATES TO OBSERVE AND LEARN.

¶21. (C) THE ATTITUDE OF MUSLIMS IN THE AFAR REGION IS POSITIVE. MUSLIM ELDERS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IN THE AFAR REGIONAL STATE RECENTLY EXPRESSED THEIR SATISFACTION TO US WITH THE GFDRE POLICIES OF DECENTRALIZATION AND REGIONALIZATION. WITH THE CREATION OF THE AFAR STATE IN 1995, MUSLIM AFARS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ETHIOPIAN HISTORY FEEL THEY CAN CONTROL THEIR OWN DESTINY WITHOUT INTERFERENCE FROM CHRISTIAN HIGHLANDERS.

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ISLAM GROWING FASTER THAN ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOXY?  
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¶22. (C) WE ARE HEARING ANECDOTAL INFORMATION THAT THE GROWTH OF ISLAM IN ETHIOPIA MAY BE OUTPACING THAT OF NEW ADHERENTS TO THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH. IN FACT, MOST MUSLIMS TODAY DISPUTE THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM THAT 40 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION IS MOSLEM AND 50 PERCENT ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX WITH THE REMAINING 10 PERCENT PROTESTANT, CATHOLIC AND ANIMIST. THE PAPAL NUNCIO HAS TAKEN A PARTICULAR INTEREST IN THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND HAS HAD A NUMBER OF FRANK



DISCUSSIONS WITH THE CHURCH HIERARCHY. ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOXY IS WELL KNOWN FOR ITS CONSERVATISM AND LACK OF PROGRESSIVE IDEAS. MOST OF THE CHURCH LEADERSHIP ALSO FALLS INTO THIS CATEGORY. THOSE FEW WHO WOULD LIKE TO MODERNIZE THE CHURCH HAVE CONFIDED TO THE PAPAL NUNCIO THAT THE CHURCH IS HAVING GREAT DIFFICULTY OBTAINING THE ALLEGIANCE OF YOUNG ETHIOPIANS. AT THE SAME TIME, THERE IS STRONG RESISTANCE WITHIN THE CHURCH TO MODERNIZE. THE MORE ENLIGHTENED LEADERS FEAR THIS IS GOING TO CHANGE SIGNIFICANTLY THE STATISTICAL BREAKDOWN BETWEEN ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX AND MUSLIMS IN THE COMING YEARS.

¶23. (C) WHILE THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH MAY WELL BE FACING VERY SLOW GROWTH, WE SEE NO EVIDENCE THAT IS THE CASE FOR THE MUSLIM POPULATION. ALTHOUGH STATISTICS ARE LACKING, THE NUMBER OF NEW MOSQUES UNDER CONSTRUCTION AND INFORMATION BASED ON OUR TRAVEL AROUND THE COUNTRY SUGGEST THAT ISLAM IS ADDING TO ITS NUMBERS WITH EASE. WE SHOULD ALSO NOTE THAT PROTESTANT GROUPS, PARTICULARLY THE MODERATE EVANGELICAL MEKANE YESUS AND PENTECOSTALS ARE ALSO GROWING RAPIDLY. BUT THEIR GROWTH COMES FROM A MUCH SMALLER BASE, PARTICULARLY THE PENTECOSTALS. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS SITUATION FOR THE FUTURE IS CLEAR. SHOULD MUSLIMS BECOME IN THE NOT DISTANT FUTURE A MAJORITY, WHICH IS A REAL POSSIBILITY, IT WILL EVENTUALLY CHANGE THE POLITICAL DYNAMIC OF ETHIOPIA. BECAUSE THE MUSLIMS ARE POLITICALLY DIVIDED AND TEND TO RESIDE IN THE PERIPHERY AS OPPOSED TO THE HIGHLANDS OF ETHIOPIA, WE DO NOT ANTICIPATE ISLAMIC POLITICAL LEADERSHIP ANYTIME SOON. BUT WE DO NEED TO BE ALERT TO THE CHANGING DYNAMIC HERE.

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COMMENT  
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¶24. (C) ETHIOPIA'S MUSLIMS NOW ENJOY BETTER TREATMENT THAN AT ANY TIME IN THEIR LENGTHY HISTORY, THIS DESPITE THE GFDRE'S DEEP CONCERN OVER THE SPREAD OF MUSLIM EXTREMISM WHICH, IT BELIEVES, IS SUPPORTED BY RADICAL ELEMENTS IN KHARTOUM AND BY WEALTHY PRIVATE INTERESTS IN THE GULF STATES.

¶25. (C) THE GFDRE APPEARS DETERMINED TO UNDERMINE THE THREAT OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM BY WORKING CLOSELY WITH MAINSTREAM MUSLIMS AND BY CLOSELY MONITORING RADICAL GROUPS IN NEIGHBORING SOMALIA AND SUDAN. NO MILITANT GROUP POSES A SIGNIFICANT THREAT TO THE GFDRE AT THIS TIME, ALTHOUGH SEVERAL ARE CAPABLE OF ISOLATED TERRORIST ATTACKS. NEVERTHELESS, AS LONG AS AL-ITTIHAD RECEIVES OUTSIDE FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND ENJOYS SAFE HAVENS IN NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES, THE ETHIOPIAN MILITARY CANNOT COMPLETELY DEFEAT THE EXTREMISTS. SIMILARLY, UNTIL FUNDAMENTAL POWER-SHARING ISSUES ARE RESOLVED AMONG COMPETING ETHIO-SOMALI CLANS, THE EXTREMISTS WILL BE ABLE TO CAPITALIZE ON ANY RESULTING DISSATISFACTION.

¶26. (C) THE RADICAL ISLAMIC MESSAGE HAS LITTLE APPEAL FOR MOST ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS. ONLY IN PERIPHERAL AREAS WHERE THE FLEDGING REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS HAVE YET TO MAKE AN IMPACT ON THE OFTEN DESPERATE POPULATION ARE THE EXTREMISTS MAKING LIMITED HEADWAY. HUNGRY AND THIRSTY PEOPLE ACT TO SURVIVE, RARELY OUT OF TRUE DEDICATION TO THE MILITANT CAUSE. NEITHER AL-ITTIHAD NOR OTHER MILITANT GROUPS SUCH AS THE ISLAMIC FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF OROMIA HAVE ATTRACTED SIGNIFICANT POPULAR SUPPORT.

¶27. (C) THE NEW SIC IS BUSILY TRYING TO MAKE UP FOR YEARS OF NEGLECT AND PROVIDE BETTER SERVICE TO THE ETHIOPIAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY. THEY ARE PLEASED WITH RELATIONS WITH THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT AND ARE ENJOYING THEIR NEW-FOUND FREEDOM TO PRACTICE THEIR RELIGION WITHOUT INTERFERENCE, BUT ARE HAMPERED BY A LACK OF MONEY AND A SERIOUSLY DETERIORATED MUSLIM INFRASTRUCTURE.

¶28. (C) AFTER HUNDREDS OF YEARS OF LIVING TOGETHER IN

RELATIVE ISOLATION, THERE ARE FEW BURNING ISSUES THAT  
DIVIDE ETHIOPIA'S MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AND  
FEWER STILL THAT ARE LIKELY TO PROVOKE VIOLENT CLASHES  
BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS.

SHINN